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Honors Thesis: Law Enforcement, Public Opinion, the Media, and its Effects

University Honors Program Thesis Project

University of Nebraska at Omaha

Submitted by:

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University of Nebraska at Omaha Honors Thesis Abstract

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Abstract of Thesis

The United States Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates that, in 2018, law enforcement workers made up about .8% of the country's workforce. Given that they make up such a large percentage of the workforce plus the extreme public visibility of the profession by nature, law enforcement is a highly discussed topic. After the controversial officer-involved shootings of Michael Brown, Walter Scott, and Freddie Gray between 2014 and 2016 the credibility and integrity of law enforcement came into question. Law enforcement is depicted on many media platforms in many different ways; The current research leverages qualitative data obtained from in-depth oral interviews with 25 law enforcement officers (LEOs) from three Midwest agencies to provide insight into the perspectives of LEOs and how they feel the public and the media view and cover them and their work. Results suggested that participants believed no form of media or media outlet portrays law enforcement accurately and many participants opined that the law enforcement is, more often than not, portrayed in a negative light by national media. Approximately half of all participants stated that public perception of law enforcement was at least somewhat positive at the beginning of their career and over 90% of participants who responded to the question stated that that public perception of law enforcement has gotten worse since their careers began.

Honors Thesis: Law Enforcement, Public Opinion, the Media, and its Effects

I. Introduction

Law enforcement is the subject of much casual and formal conversation across the country and has been for several years given the occurrence of a number of high-profile officer-involved shootings of unarmed black men including the Michael Brown, Freddie Gray, Walter Scott, and Sam Dubose cases among others that occurred between 2014 and 2016 in Ferguson, MO, North Charleston, SC, Baltimore, MD, and Cincinnati, OH (CBC News, 2017). Some suggest that these events gave way to what some refer to as the “Ferguson Effect” which Wolfe and Nix state is “in reference to the deadly police shooting of Michael Brown... that triggered public protest and negative international media attention” (2016). The Ferguson Effect is defined as the effects of the aforementioned events that, in turn, resulted in increased scrutiny of police by the media and the general public. This scrutinization resulted in de-policing which emboldened criminals and led to a rapid increase in violent crime.

Wolfe and Nix (2016) sought to research this phenomenon to determine the validity of such a theory due to the lack of empirical evidence available. However, an argument can be made such that, regardless of whether or not the Ferguson Effect is found to be correlative—or causative—of increased violent crime rates, police departments have lost the trust of their communities which, in some instances during this time period, resulted in rioting.

A Pew Research study consisting of insights from nearly 8,000 policemen and women conducted by the National Police Research Platform found that, since the events that unfolded during the two years following the 2014 shooting of Michael Brown, up to 72% of participants stated that they are “less willing to stop and question suspicious persons” despite reports from

several U.S. cities that, after several years of nearly record low crime rates, there was an unprecedented 16.8% rise in homicides in 56 major cities across the US between 2014 to 2015 and that 86% of officers state that their job is much harder today due to the aforementioned high-profile incidents (Morin, Parker, Stepler, & Mercer, 2017; Rosenfield, 2016;). An article written in the Wall Street Journal opines that the events surrounding the Michael Brown shooting and others have resulted in overarching anti police sentiment even when the use of deadly force is justified; for instance, in October of 2014, Vonderrit Myers was shot by officers after having “fired three shots at an officer at close range,” yet the area was wrought with hostility toward law enforcement for the use of force in response to the shots fired and misinformation regarding the circumstances of the encounter was spread about the officers involved (Mac Donald, 2015). Some believe that the overall anti police sentiment is the main driving force of the alleged “Ferguson Effect” (Mac Donald, 2015).

Anti-police sentiment began growing prior to the Michael Brown case, so much so that there was a dramatic uptick in murders of law enforcement officers (LEOs) from 2013 to 2014. The FBI reports that in 2013, 27 officers were killed as a result of felonious acts whereas 51 were killed as a result of felonious acts in 2014, eight of whom were killed in ambush attacks (2015). These numbers are thought to be about on par with the average each year and research has found no evidence that the number of felonious killings of LEOS have increased drastically, defining what some have coined the “War on Cops” given that the 51 killings of LEOs came after an historic 35-year low (Shjarback & Maguire, 2019; Maguire et al., 2017; White et al., 2019) . One might begin to wonder, upon examining this issue closer, what is driving overall anti-police sentiment itself; granted, the officer-involved shootings of Black individuals in the following years plays a consequential role in this, but the current study aims to examine a

subtler, more ingrained part of society that sometimes seems to act as judge, jury, and executioner. That entity is the court of public opinion driven by media influence. A study conducted by Wolfe and Nix (2016) suggests that “Deputies who reported being less motivated as a result of negative publicity surrounding law enforcement... indicated less willingness to partner with the community” (p. 6). Pyrooz et al. (2016, p. 3-4) Another study found no evidence to support “systematic change in crime trends in large U.S. cities . . . after the shooting of Michael Brown, and the subsequent social unrest and social media responses”. However, some research suggests a sole exception in reference to the incidence of robberies while “city-level trends in crime continued along roughly the same linear path before and after Ferguson” (Gross & Mann, 2017, p. 4).

“Only in a few select cities—including Baltimore, St. Louis, Newark, New Orleans, Washington, D.C., Milwaukee, and Rochester—did homicides pick up after the Ferguson protests, but they note that these were high-crime cities already with characteristics predisposing them to violence, such as a large proportion of residents living in poverty. Without factoring such characteristics into the analysis, Pyrooz et al. (2016) conclude, it would be difficult to tell whether the homicide increase was driven by public concern over policing practices or more typical sociological factors” (Gross & Mann, 2017, p. 4)

The current US population is ~328 million with a workforce of ~157 million (*United States Census Bureau*, 2020; DeSilver, 2019). Given that estimates suggest that there are about 900,000 sworn LEOs serving in the US, that means that approximately .6% of the US workforce are LEOs (*Law Enforcement Facts*, 2020) while the US Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates approximately .8% in 2018 (*Employment By Detailed Occupation*, 2019). For the sake of context, that’s roughly the same number of actively licensed physicians in the US in 2016

(953,695) and almost exactly two thirds the number of attorneys in the US in 2019 (1.35 million) (Young et al., 2017; Mazareanu, 2019). In addition to their prevalence among society the nature of the profession renders law enforcement extremely publicly visible, thus the categorization of LEOs as public servants. Lay opinion and perception of law enforcement is widespread on social media, in news media, in entertainment media, and more. Given that the role of law enforcement is to protect and build relationships with their respective communities, it is important that officers, deputies, and troopers learn about and understand their communities; however, given the frequent interactions between law enforcement and members of their communities, it is important that the communities learn about the officers, deputies, and troopers who serve their area.

Mainstream media perceptions vary from news agency to news agency and may be different than those observed on social media and also different than perceptions put forth in movies and TV shows. The post-Ferguson era has brought to light a trend of de-policing occurring in many places across the country which many suggest is as a result of negative media publicity; A 2017 study by Blake & Lafond with almost 500 patrol level officers from a number of agencies varying in size found that “a significant number of participants involved... stated they had reduced discretionary pedestrian and traffic stops by almost 50%” (p. 40). In another study by Wolfe and Nix (2015) examining the effects of negative publicity on officer feelings of self-legitimacy it was found that “lack of motivation stemming from negative publicity had a moderate, negative relationship with self-legitimacy among deputies in this sample” (p.14). The Ferguson effect itself suggests that there was a significant increase in violent crime following the events that took place in Ferguson, MO with the shooting of Michael Brown in 2014. As mentioned previously, Pyrooz et al. (2016) examined this phenomenon and found that there was

no systematic crime increase in the 12 months following the events of Ferguson. Regardless of whether or not crime has increased as a result of those events or as a result of negative police publicity in the media, the trend of negative police publicity *may* result in decreased officer morale and/or feed the “us-versus-them” mentality in policing as evidenced by Nix & Pickett, 2017 as well as Nix & Wolfe, 2016. A study by Marier & Fridell (2020, p. 31) examined whether the demoralization of officers as a result of the public reaction to Ferguson and Baltimore has resulted in de-policing but found that “officers’ perceptions of public attitudes did not appreciably change after demonstrations--officers *already* perceived a high degree of antagonism that the protests may have only reified. In one survey, 92% of officers reported the belief that recent protests were driven by long standing anti-police bias, rather than an earnest movement for police accountability and reform (Morin et al., 2017)”. In essence, the aforementioned trend of negative police publicity is thought to have had a significant impact on officer morale which then impacted de-policing, but this trend began long before any of the controversial events in the mid 2010’s, not as a result of the demonstrations that took place during that time.

Research Questions

The current study aims to explore perceptions of LEOs of varying ranks from three Midwest agencies at the city, county, and state levels in the hope of providing a more holistic understanding of how public opinion and the media impact law enforcement officers on an individual level as well as on law enforcement agencies as a whole. The scope of this research is strictly exploratory. The following research questions were developed as an outline for exploring outcomes of patterns that developed throughout the interview process with individual LEOs.

1. What are LEOs views on how the public and the media perceive them and their work?
2. How well do LEOs perceive their profession is represented in terms of accuracy?

II. Methods

a. Participants

The current study consisted of $n = 25$ participants from three agencies in the Midwest from all three non-federal levels of government: city, county, and state. Originally, it was expected that there would be 30 participants, but due to concerns surrounding COVID-19 that arose during data collection, interviews were halted as it began to pose an increase in danger to the investigators and the participants. In order to ensure the safety of all, interviews ceased after 25 had been completed. Ten participants came from law enforcement agencies at the county and state levels of government, respectively and five participants came from the city government level. For $n = 25$ participants, 20% of participants were female (5) and 80% of participants were male (20). Each participant is a sworn LEO with their respective agency. The average years of experience across all participants was ~17 years with a range from 16-31 years and ages ranged from 21-60. Rank of each LEO varied including uniform patrol Officers/Deputies/Troopers, Detectives/Investigators, Sergeants, Lieutenants, Captains, as well as a Chief Deputy. This variety was sought after to obtain a cross-section of perspectives from as many levels as possible at each agency. Participants were identified and selected by their employing agency to take part in the current research.

b. Procedures

The current research was completed by conducting oral, in-person, and in-depth interviews with sworn LEOs at the office of their respective employing agencies. The intention was that none of the participants would have exposure to the exact interview questions themselves prior to the interview, but participants were made aware of the general nature of the topic that they would be discussing upon receipt of the informed consent form participants were

asked to sign before voluntarily participating in the research study. Non-exposure to the actual interview questions was achieved with two of the three participating agencies; however, one agency sent the questions out to the participants without the primary investigator's prior knowledge. It became clear that the majority of those who *did* receive the questions in advance did not read them or spend time drafting responses, thus allowing for impromptu and spontaneous responses. Interview questions are provided in Appendix A. Interviewee responses were audio recorded on a password and biometrically protected mobile device using the Audio Recorder application developed by the Music Downloader Group; These audio recordings were stored securely on that mobile device. Written notes were also transcribed and kept by the primary investigator which were kept in a locked filing cabinet to which only the primary investigator had access. Participants were not compensated for their participation and the research protocol was approved by the University of Nebraska Medical Center Institutional Review Board.

III. Results

Question 1 of Appendix A asked participants why they chose to go into law enforcement and the answers varied greatly. Participants were permitted to provide multiple responses to this question; 4 stated that their prior military experience lead them to want to go into law enforcement; 6 stated that they had wanted to be a police officer since their childhood; 6 stated that they were taking coursework in the field of criminal justice in college or obtained a degree in criminal justice; 7 stated that they went into law enforcement solely due to a desire to help people or to have an impact on their community; 6 stated that they were drawn to law enforcement because they had family or friends in law enforcement; 1 cited the events of 9/11 as their reason for going into law enforcement; and finally, 3 stated they went into law enforcement

because they spent a lot of time watching shows like COPS or Live PD and other shows on television.

Participants were then asked what they felt society or their community's perception of law enforcement was at the advent of their career (Appendix B); The breakdown of participants' responses is as follows: (a) Mostly positive: 7, (b) Somewhat positive: 5, (c) Neutral: 5, (d) Somewhat negative: 3, (e) Mostly negative: 3, (f) Unsure/abstained: 2.

The next question inquired of participants whether they (1) felt public perception of law enforcement had changed since the advent of their career (Appendix C) and, furthermore, (2) in what direction, a more positive or negative change; The breakdown of participants' responses for (1) is as follows: (a) Yes: 21, (b) No: 1, (c) Abstained: 2. The breakdown of participants' responses for (2) are as follows: (a) More negative: 19, (b) More positive: 2.

Additionally, participants were asked (1) how they feel the media portrays law enforcement today (Appendix D) and (2) whether the media portray law enforcement accurately (on average). The breakdown of participants' responses for (1) are as follows: (a) In a positive light: 0, (b) In a negative light: 22, (c) In neither a positive or negative light: 3. The breakdown of participants' responses for (2) are as follows: (a) Law enforcement is portrayed accurately by the media: 0, (b) Law enforcement is portrayed inaccurately by the media: 25.

Participants were then asked how mass media, entertainment media, news media, and/or social media portrayals of law enforcement have impacted that participant's employing agency (if at all). A variety of responses were provided with several common themes: that agencies are much more attentive to the tenor of the national media, agencies are getting in front of stories so that accurate facts are put out before the narrative can be skewed, agencies are training officers to perform their professional duties and behave as if they are being recorded at all times.

Additionally, many participants stated that their agency has upped their presence on social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Finally, 4 stated that negative media attention and publicity has drastically and negatively impacted the number of applicants that apply to their agency when they are hiring.

In the next question, participants were asked about how those same forms of media (mass media, entertainment media, news media, and/or social media) have impacted them, specifically, as a LEO or as a private citizen. Ten participants stated that those forms of media have no impact on them professionally. Two participants cited having become more cautious and suspicious of interactions with the public due to the degradation of public opinion toward LEOs. Four participants stated having quit watching the news or having deleted their social media accounts. A few participants mentioned that they refuse to go home in uniform, that they change at the office before going home and do not display any form of support for law enforcement or the “thin blue line” on their cars, in or outside of their homes, and that they do not tell people or hide what they do for a living for fear of putting themselves or their families in danger.

The subsequent question was similar to the previous two but asked about how those same forms of media (mass media, entertainment media, news media, and/or social media) have impacted how they perform their professional duties (if at all). The breakdown of participants’ responses are as follows (Appendix E): (a) No impact: 22, (b) Yes impact: 1. Many of those who responded that the way they perform their duties is in no way impacted often stated that they consistently perform their duties as if they are being recorded at all times and that, if one does the job as they are supposed to and as they were trained to do it, being recorded or having their body camera footage made publicly available should not frighten or intimidate them. One participant stated that body camera and dash camera footage has saved his career many times and

it has never put his career in jeopardy. Participants simply said they had an increased level of self-awareness but nothing more. The one participant who stated it changed the way in which they perform their duties stated that when walking up to a car for a traffic stop where the subject has begun recording with their cell phone, they would not spend as much time interacting with that subject but that they would, “get what was going to be issued to them and I am just going to go on with my day”. This participant stated he would not be any less cordial with the individual but referenced not enjoying having a camera in his face while trying to do his job and talk with the subject. The overall consensus was that they work with the philosophy that one should not treat any one person any differently than the next.

The next question inquired as to what the participants feel society or mass media frequently get wrong about law enforcement as well as common yet incorrect myths or assumptions about law enforcement. A number of themes became clear. Many participants discussed a societal trend in which many believe that all LEOs are corrupt or racially prejudiced due to the actions of a few, to use the exact verbiage, ‘bad apples’. Another common theme amongst participant responses was that, when one sees the frequent ‘ten-second clip’ that makes headlines and takes the Internet by storm, they must know that the video clip does not represent the full context of the events leading up to that moment. Participants stated that oftentimes, these videos do not show the commands of officers prior to the use of force or the instigative actions of the subject with whom contact is being made. Another major theme was that law enforcement perceive that the public think they are out to “do them dirty” or to hurt or kill people solely because of an alleged power complex. Additionally, many stated that the public does not recognize the fact that life-or-death decisions are made by LEOs in a fraction of a second; they do not have time to fully process or contemplate the spectrum of possible responses due to the

perception of an immediate threat to either the officer or the life of a member of the community. This phenomenon is known as “split-second syndrome” and is discussed by Jim Fyfe (Dunham, Alpert, & Fyfe, 1989) as one of a number of determinants of police violence. A number of participants touched on the fact that, when investigations are still in the works, many details cannot and should not be shared with the public at that time for the safety of involved parties and that it does not insinuate that the agency or other officers are covering up for the actions of any one or group of people. Finally, one command level LEO stated, in their words, that “officers are just a cross section of society and your community. They are not coming from some alternate universe”. This participant stated that there are practices in place to make sure that bad apples do not make it into law enforcement, but some slip through the cracks and they are always vigilant about weeding those individuals out.

The second to final question inquired of participants what they feel society or the media often gets right about law enforcement or things that the public believe that LEOs would say are true. The most common response was that one does see the ‘feel-good’ stories occasionally where the kindness of an officer or their actions are commended and made known publicly either on the news or on social media. Another frequent theme is that, though the national media is deemed, by all participants, as being inaccurate and, that the national media seems to portray law enforcement in a negative light, on average, local media tends to be much more fair and unbiased, consistent with Nix, Pickett, & Wolfe (2019). Finally, 3 participants stated that, due to increased transparency by law enforcement agencies and many television shows, much of the public knows what police officers do or what their duties are and the public generally recognize that LEOs are there to protect the public and they know who to call when they need help.

Finally, the last question offered participants an opportunity to provide a piece of knowledge that they wish the public knew or would recognize. The most frequently recurring pattern across all interviews, said almost identically each time was that “we are human, just like everyone else” and that at the end of the day, LEOs just want to make it back home to their families. Additionally, some participants stated that LEOs do what they do out of a willingness or desire to serve others, not themselves, that LEOs are not “out to get” the public, and that there are things they have to do in their job that they wished they did not have to do, but it is required of them by the nature of their profession. Though some would present exceptions to this statement, some participants stated officer candidates do not go into law enforcement with a bone to pick with people or the community or to violate anyone’s rights. Additionally, several participants wished that the public knew that, at least in the state in which the participating agencies are located, that there are no ticket quotas. Finally, a recurring phrase throughout interviews with participants was that “no one hates a bad cop more than a good cop” due to the fact that it makes the job of law enforcement that much more difficult for everyone else.

IV. Discussion

The results suggest that the majority of the sample agree that the national media portrays law enforcement in an inaccurate way and in a negative light. Though the participants from the agencies in the current study do not represent all LEOs, the consistent responses from participants across all different age groups, genders, and ethnicities suggest a widespread pattern especially given that zero participants stated that any form of media portrays law enforcement accurately. Whereas more than half of participants stated that public perception of law enforcement was, to some degree, positive when they began their career, 21 participants stated that public perception had changed since their career began, 19 of whom opined that the state of

public opinion toward law enforcement had declined. Questions 8 and 9 resulted in some contradictory responses; some participants stated that they felt the public thinks that LEOs are out to do cause harm or chaos while others said they feel the majority of the public understand that the role of law enforcement is to protect and serve their community. Though several participants alluded to the fact that the public take their cues from the media and how law enforcement is portrayed therein the aforementioned contradictory statements, in addition to the limited number of questions pertaining specifically to citizens' perspectives of law enforcement due to the major focus on media, limit the conclusions that can be drawn from the data. Though the majority of participants stated that media portrayals of law enforcement have no impact on how they perform their duties, one command level LEO stated that the 'hyper-scrutinization' of law enforcement and the negative media publicity has put officers' lives at risk. This participant stated that they spend much of their time reviewing body camera footage and, due to officer hesitation, many officers do not take action soon enough or do not use force when it is warranted. This individual opined that the negative media attention has been a main causal factor in this change as they feel officers are afraid of losing their jobs for taking that action even though it would have been, in this participant's words, well within their right. This thought process is consistent with much of the literature currently available (Mac Donald, 2015; Reese 2014; Nix & Pickett, 2017; Davis, 2015) This can be seen clearly in many events similar to one like that which occurred in Birmingham, Alabama where a detective was pistol-whipped unconscious with his own duty-weapon. The detective later stated that he "hesitated to use force because he didn't want to be accused of needlessly killing an unarmed man". The detective elaborated in an interview, "A lot of officers are being too cautious because of what's going on in the media... I hesitated because I didn't want to be in the media like I am right now" (Valencia,

2015). Slightly altering the wording of Question 6 may have allowed more detailed insight into this thought process in each interview; Future additional research must be done to explore this idea.

a. Limitations and Future Directions

Due to the small number of participating agencies and their proximity to one another, generalizability of these results are limited to the individual participants themselves. Future research must be done collecting data from a larger pool of participants and with agencies across the country in order to draw more generalizable conclusions. Additional interview questions should be drafted for further clarification to obtain information from participants regarding hesitation to use force as well as to differentiate, objectively, the difference in media portrayals at the local versus national level. This research may have benefitted from the use of close-ended interview questions or survey format providing multiple choice responses or likert scale formatted questions so as to allow for more static quantifiable data that makes for increased ease of data analysis as open-ended responses present challenges for data interpretation.

V. Conclusion

The current research sought to shed light into how LEOs feel they are portrayed by media and with what accuracy as well as how the public feel about them and their work. The overwhelming trend suggests that LEOs generally do not believe that any media source accurately portrays them or their work and the majority believe that law enforcement is portrayed in a negative light by national news media which some participants claimed has dangerous effects for LEOs. Public opinion on law enforcement shifts depending on recent events which results in a constant ebb and flow of support. Data showed that, though more than half of participants thought public opinion was at least somewhat positive when their career began, 21

stated that public opinion had shifted, 19 of whom opined that public opinion had declined. One additional participant stated public opinion started bad and never got better. These findings are significant to the results of this study, however, due to the limited number of participants and participating agencies, no conclusions can be drawn about the *nationwide* state of public opinion toward law enforcement but these data will help contribute to the pool of knowledge allowing other researchers to further investigate this topic.

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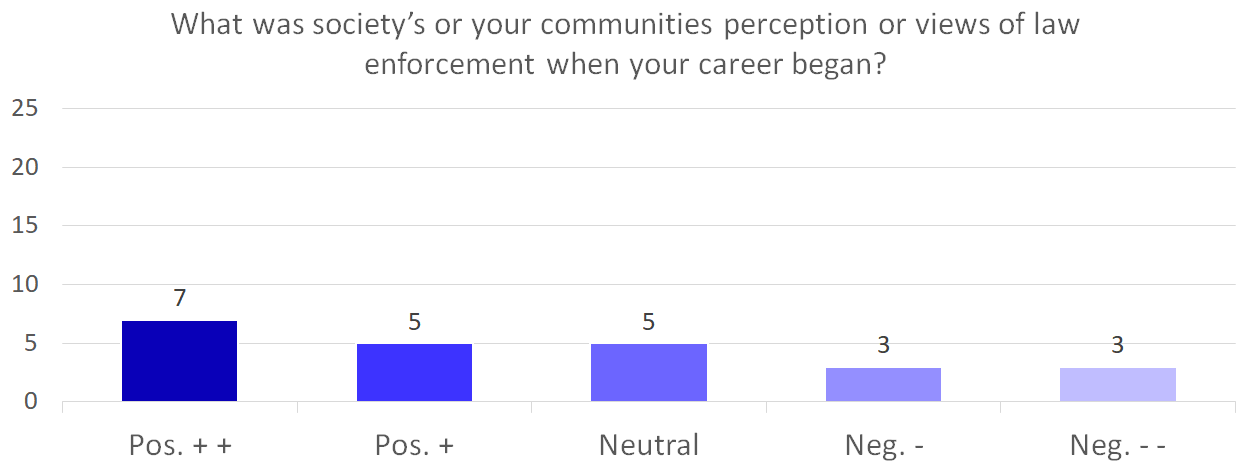
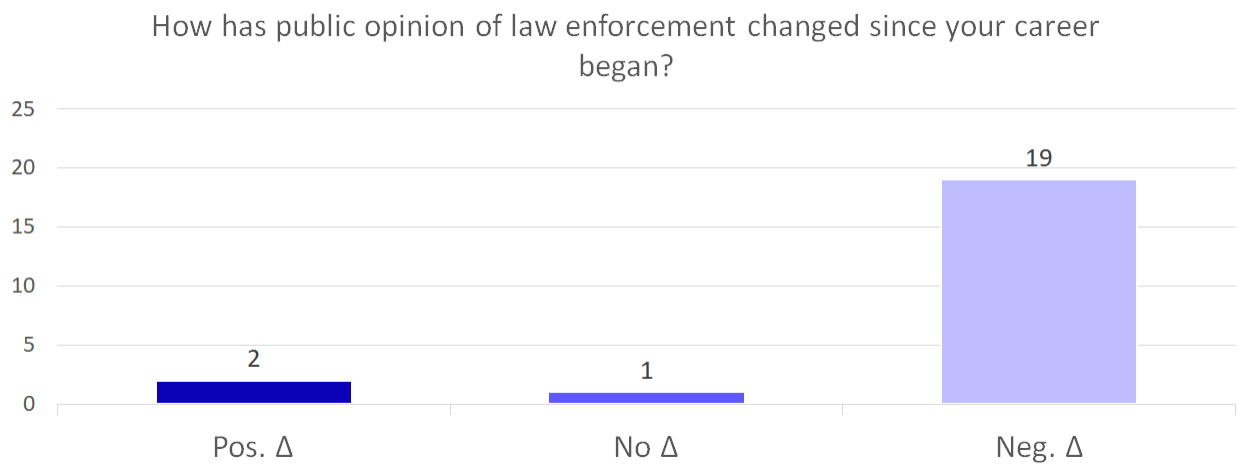
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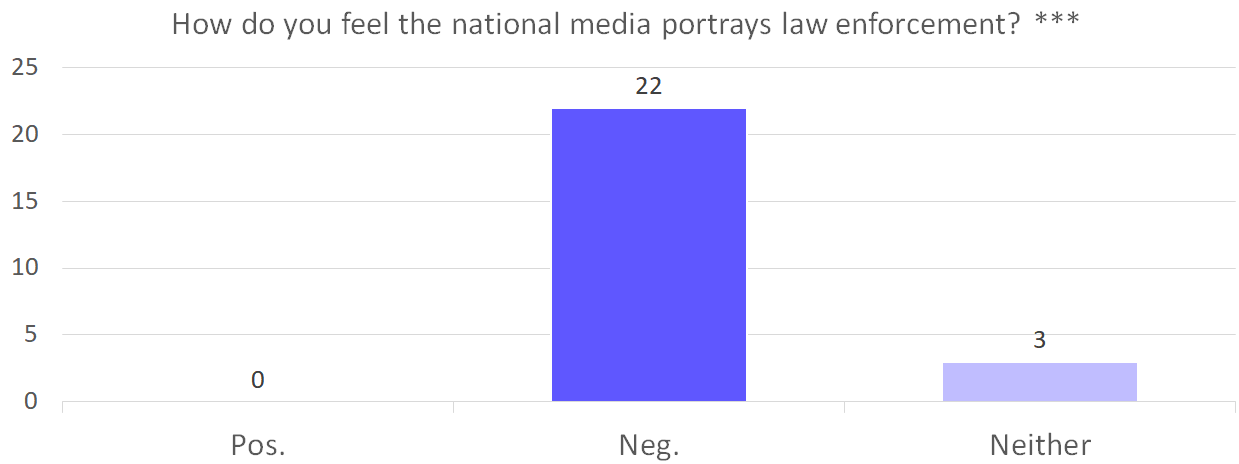
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Appendices

Appendix A

1. Why did you become a law enforcement officer?
2. What was society's, or your community's perception or view of law enforcement at that time?
3. Do you feel that public opinion on law enforcement has changed since you entered law enforcement and how?
4. How do you feel the media portrays law enforcement today? Would you say that is an accurate portrayal of law enforcement today (on average)? Why or why not?
5. How, if at all, have mass media, entertainment media, news media, and/or social media portrayals of law enforcement impacted this agency? (Policy changes?)
6. How, if at all, have mass media, entertainment media, news media, and/or social media portrayals of law enforcement impacted you as a LEO? As a private citizen?
7. How, if at all, have mass media, entertainment media, news media, or social media portrayals of law enforcement impacted how you perform your duties? (discretion choices?)
8. What do you feel, if anything, does society or mass media have wrong about law enforcement, its agencies, its officers, or their duties?
9. What do you feel, if anything, does society or mass media have right about law enforcement, its agencies, its officers, or their duties?
10. If there was one thing you wanted civilians to know about law enforcement, its agencies, its officers, or their duties, what would it be?

Appendix B**Appendix C**

Appendix D**Appendix E**